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## What Lies Beneath Affects Rising Homes

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**PLANT CITY** - Carl Crowell isn't sure what caused his prostate cancer, and he can't say why many of his neighbors have been stricken with other forms of the disease.

Public health agencies don't know either. But they are trying to determine whether pollution from a phosphate plant and old landfills could be linked to illness in Crowell's neighborhood and another Plant City community about two miles away.

Crowell, 71, isn't pointing a finger of blame. But he wonders why the city would consider a plan to create Plant City's largest development - 2,600 houses - between the neighborhoods being studied by health officials.

It's a question some city officials are asking, too.

``Are we going to develop an area where we have to warn people that [living there] may be hazardous to your health?" Plant City Commissioner Richard Glorioso said.

The state has unearthed no definitive evidence that cancer rates in the communities are higher than state averages. But officials are concerned the complaints - including bone impairments, bad teeth and cancer - are coming from areas near the Coronet Industries phosphate processing plant, where they have found elevated levels of cancer-causing substances in groundwater and soil. The plant is just south of the 1,300 acres on which Sunrise Homes proposes to build the Lakeside Station development. The development would be on land owned by Gregg Enterprises - formerly Consolidated Minerals Inc.

When state investigators checked out health complaints, residents ``pointed out almost every house as having people currently sick with cancer or people who have died in the last few years of cancer - often both husband and wife, and sometimes children," says a report written by Beth Copeland and Shaun Crawford of the Florida Department of Health.

That report helped persuade the U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry on Friday to authorize the Health Department to further study the effects of the plant and surrounding properties on the residents' health.

The agency, an arm of the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, could have a report ready by March, said John Steward, the agency's petition coordinator.

Officials first want to find out whether people were exposed to toxic substances, Steward said.

An exposure investigation, sometimes part of the process, involves testing for the presence of chemicals in blood, hair or urine.

``There's enough information to suggest there is a potential for people becoming exposed to those [contaminants] in the past, currently or in the future," he said.

The Health Department's recommendation focused much of its attention on Coronet, which processes phosphate for use in animal feed supplements.

State health officials said their initial findings - carcinogens in groundwater at Coronet, air quality problems and a history of pollution at the site - merit further investigation.

In a report to the federal agency June 18, the Health Department said a community spokesman reported that 36 people living in a neighborhood of about 500 northwest of Coronet have died of cancer in the past few years. A spokesman for the community of about 200 residents to the east said 98 people there have died from cancer. No time period was given.

The state has not verified the numbers, however, and state cancer statistics for the ZIP codes affected show rates consistent with state averages.

Some residents have told the state their illnesses might be attributed to pollution from Coronet or possibly waste burning on adjacent dumps from the late 1950s to the late 1960s.

The old landfills - on the Lakeside Station site - would be developed as a park. Much of the property intended for the housing development also was mined for phosphate until the 1930s.

### **Cancer Clusters**

Cancer clusters, concentrated areas where the disease occurs in an abnormally high percentage of the population, as the community complaints suggest, are often difficult to verify even after extensive investigation.

Jim Baker, Coronet's environmental manager, said he is uncomfortable commenting on the Health Department's report because it is preliminary.

Arsenic, cadmium, chromium, lead and gross alpha radiation were found in high concentrations from 1998 through 2002 on Coronet's land, the state report says. All are carcinogens.

Fluoride - also found in groundwater at the plant - can cause bone problems in high concentrations, health officials said. The amounts reported at Coronet far exceed state and federal guidelines.

The community east of Coronet gets its water from private wells, and those living northwest of the plant are on city water. Health officials are concerned not only with the drinking water but also general exposure to toxic substances in air emissions or from children playing in ditches flooded with contaminated water.

Some symptoms reported by people south of U.S. 92 and west of Park Road and also in the community east of Coronet off Wiggins Road are consistent with effects caused by high levels of fluoride, said Copeland, a community involvement specialist with the state Health Department.

City officials are considering a land-use change that would designate the industrially zoned property for mixed-use residential development. That would allow Sunrise Homes to build a community complete with commercial businesses, light industrial businesses and a school.

City commissioners plan to discuss ordinance changes that would make way for the development at an 8 a.m. workshop Monday before taking it to a public hearing at 7:30 that night.

### **History Of Pollution**

Consolidated Minerals sold the Coronet plant to Japanese investors in 1993 but still owns much of the surrounding property. Coronet has changed ownership many times, and pollution from the plant was documented as early as the 1960s.

Plant owners were sued in federal court in the 1960s by citrus growers who claimed dust from Coronet ruined their crops. They were awarded \$200,000 in damages.

Coronet has been under county scrutiny since at least the late 1990s due to air pollution and hydrofluoric acid spills that caused water contamination.

Also included in the health officials' report in June to the federal toxic substance agency were results of tests at the Coronet plant site conducted by the state Department of Environmental Protection. Levels of several toxic substances exceeded safety guidelines.

Each time the region experiences heavy rain, settling ponds at the plant release arsenic and other toxic substances into nearby English Creek.

Coronet Industries is under orders from the state to make sure the spills stop. When the discharges occur, the toxic water flows into the creek and eventually into the Alafia River.

Initially, Coronet agreed to enlarge its ponds, which would eliminate surface water discharges. But Baker said that plan was ditched in

favor of a ``more proactive" strategy that involves treating the water. He said negotiations with the state are under way, and ``there has been no definitive treatment yet."

Coronet also is trying to avoid a shutdown by the Hillsborough County Environmental Protection Commission for air emissions violations.

The plant has a lengthy history of emissions violations, and the environmental commission has required the owners to bring the plant up to standards to eliminate toxic emissions by 2005.

``We completed a self-audit, which is being used as a tool to assist in compliance with air pollution," Baker said. The plan involves upgrades to facilities at the plant.

### **Mixed Reactions**

Glorioso said the state health report ``raises grave concerns" about developing the area. Mayor Bill Dodson also expressed concerns about potential environmental problems on the property but changed his mind in May when county environmental officials said it was safe to build there.

But Commissioner Mike Sparkman, who has lived in Plant City all of his life, doesn't ``feel there is a problem as it relates to most of the property."

``I used to do a lot of dove hunting out there," he said. ``It's some beautiful property."

Sunrise Homes commissioned several environmental studies on the land proposed for development. The first study showed elevated levels of arsenic and other metals but was inaccurate because of turbidity in collected samples, said Bob Appleyard, Sunrise's land manager. Subsequent studies indicated the property was safe for development, he said.

Appleyard said tests for gamma radiation, which provide an idea of radon concentrations, were conducted. ``The levels of gamma radiation are not at all something we are uncomfortable with," he said.

The state Health Department's reports shouldn't be taken lightly, though, Appleyard said. ``We, more than anyone, want to know more."

``We all know Coronet is a polluter," but that doesn't mean toxic substances on the company's property affected outlying areas, such as the Lakeside Station site, he said.

Jim Shimberg Jr., the attorney for Gregg Enterprises, owner of the property to be developed, called the state report ``a little misleading and inaccurate."

He used the developer's studies as he unsuccessfully tried to persuade federal health officials to not order a further health assessment.

``We've got a lot of time and money invested in this," he said. He could not estimate the cost of the development but said ``hundreds of thousands" of dollars have been spent.

### **Runoff Stays On Property**

He said the runoff from the land where development is proposed does not travel into the communities reporting health problems.

``The stormwater on Gregg's property stays in lakes and a discharge pond on property," he said.

Shimberg added, however, that if there is a serious public health concern, ``we want to know about it."

To date, the only testing done outside Coronet land was on 13 wells southeast of the plant. That testing was done under the direction of the state Department of Environmental Protection, and it revealed slightly elevated levels of arsenic in one of the wells.

Fluoride also was found in some wells, health officials said.

Because so little testing has been done, health officials have no way of knowing whether the contaminants are affecting neighboring areas.

``What bothers me the most is what I don't know," said Crawford, an environmental scientist and health assessor with the Florida Department of Health.

Coronet reported four discharges into English Creek from December 1997 to April 1998, a total of about 150 million gallons of water contaminated with arsenic.

Another discharge in September 2001 totaled 178 million gallons of contaminated water, according to the state.

Runoff from the old landfills on the proposed Lakeside Station development crosses over Park Road into the community northwest of Coronet, contributing to severe flooding, according to the Health Department's report.

``If there was, or is, contamination, flooding from rainfall could have carried it further into the community," the report said.

County officials said the water with extremely high levels of contaminants is confined to the Coronet plant property. The highly contaminated water was found beneath a leaky tank, said Sam Elrabi, an engineer with Hillsborough's environmental commission.

``That water is not leaving the site," he said.

State officials said the jury is out, however, as to which way groundwater is flowing.

``We're waiting on an assessment from [Coronet] to discern exactly how the groundwater is flowing," said Bill Kelsey, a hydrogeologist with the state environmental department.

It's not just water that worries health officials.

Dust and particulates generated by the plant have sparked enforcement action by the county.

The plant has a lengthy history of emissions violations, and Hillsborough's environmental commission required the owners to bring the plant up to standards to eliminate toxic emissions by 2005 or face being shut down.

The process Coronet uses to make its animal food supplements produces dust particles and a noxious gas called hydrofluoric acid gas, which, if released untreated, can kill plants and rust metal, Hillsborough environmental officials said.

Some residents question whether the lack of life and vegetation in ponds at the Plant City Golf Course, owned by Coronet, signals the presence of such emissions.

Baker said one pond on the course that looked particularly bad was not one of the factory's monitoring ponds.

``I'm not a biologist, so I can't comment on the status of the pond," he said.

Now that health officials are investigating, residents want questions like that answered.

Corey Bradley was a promising young college student when he was diagnosed with colon cancer. He died at age 22.

His mother, Dorothy, has wondered for years whether some sort of environmental contaminants might have contributed to his death.

``It really bothered me," she said. ``He was so young. How could he have caught something like that?"

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